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Mastering the Stasi Past: State and Societal Approaches to Working through the East German Past in Unified Germany

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With the generous grant from the Council for European Studies, I was able to complete two successful months of research in Berlin and Leipzig, Germany between October and December 2009. In this time, I conducted research at the Bundesarchiv in Berlin, the Archiv der DDR-Opposition also in Berlin, and at the Archiv der Bürgerbewegung in Leipzig. During my stay in Berlin, I split my time between the Bundesarchiv and the Archiv der DDR-Opposition, working between five and seven hours a day. I spent four days in Leipzig, working in the archive and visiting the Museum in der "Runden Ecke", the Leipzig Stasi museum. In Berlin, I also visited the Stasi Museum, attended talks and events celebrating the twentieth anniversary of the fall of the Wall, and conducted an interview with an eyewitness from the storming of the Normannenstraße Stasi headquarters. This research trip generated a wide collection of materials that I will use to write my dissertation.

The collections I utilized ranged from parliamentary documents to those spanning the development of the citizens' movements, especially Neues Forum. At the Bundesarchiv, I primarily focused on the papers of the East German Volkskammer and the Zentraler Runder Tisch. I was especially interested in how the different citizens' groups viewed their role in the transitional government, with a specific emphasis on the role of the "people" in the dissolution of the Stasi. For this reason, I made use of the documents of the parliamentary committee assigned the task of dissolving the Stasi.

At the Archiv der DDR-Opposition located in the Robert Havemann-Gesellschaft, I was able to access a wealth of document collections of the citizens' group Neues Forum. I was especially interested in locating documents related to the storming of the Berlin Stasi headquarters in the Normannenstraße as well as different sources discussing the dissolution of the Stasi. Here, I researched not only the Neues Forum collection, but also the personal archives of opposition members. At the Archiv der Bürgerbewegung Leipzig, I accessed document collections detailing the citizens' movements in Saxony as well as those that detailed the dissolution of the Stasi in Leipzig and Saxony.

The research I conducted last fall has significantly shaped the way I conceive of my dissertation. Originally I planned to focus on the creation of the BStU (the agency that manages the Stasi's files) and to explore the implications of its work for political, judicial and historical reckoning with the past. After conducting my research, the focus of my dissertation has changed considerably. My dissertation will examine the conception and passage of the law that opened the Stasi files, as well as its impact on the task of working through the past. I intend to explore what motivated East German activists to storm the Stasi headquarters and stop the shredding of the files. More importantly, I seek to understand why these activists believed they had the authority to dissolve

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the Stasi themselves and why they thought this authority should carry over into united Germany. I argue that though East German activists originally proposed the law that opened the Stasi's files, some are not entirely satisfied with the way that they are now being used. Rather than promoting an ongoing public confrontation with the past, the files are primarily used for individual reckoning and political vetting. This perceived failure of the Stasi File Law to promote public working through the past has resulted in the attempts by former activists to seek alternate forms of working through the past, specifically in the form of museums in two of the Stasi's former headquarters in Leipzig and Berlin. Without the research made possible by the pre-dissertation grant from CES, I would not have been able to refocus my dissertation in this way.

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